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Metro Sees Land Development Leading To Big Ridership Increases

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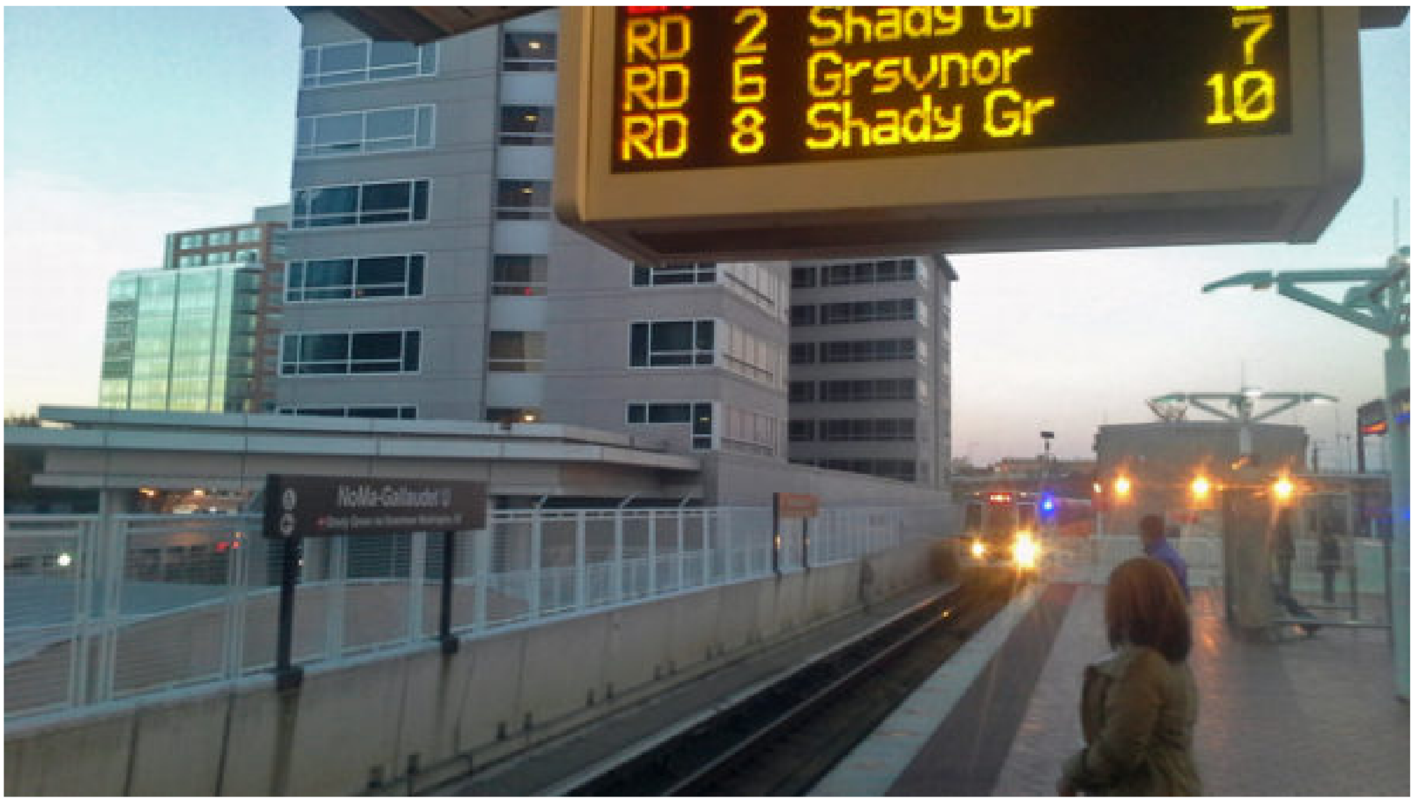
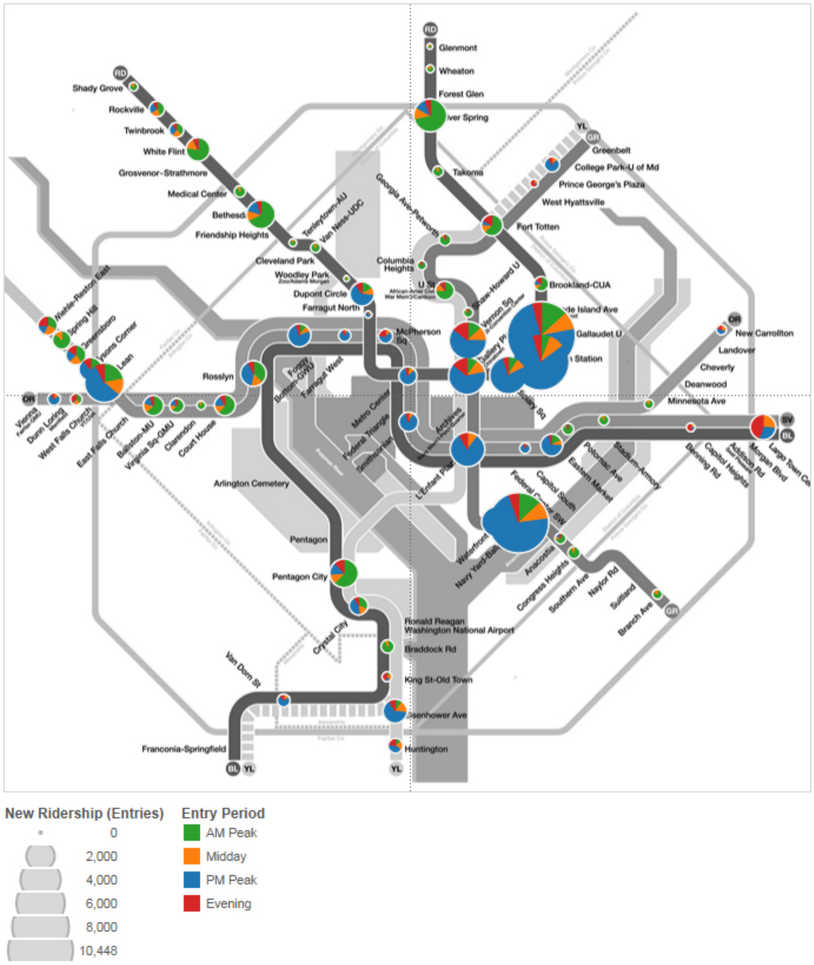


Urban development around Metro stations like NoMa-Gallaudet U is expected to put further strains on rail capacity in the coming years.

William Yurasko: https://flic.kr/p/p6h1Zd



New rail ridership from near-term development pipeline by station. *(PlanItMetro.com)*

Metro's jurisdictions are debating the best use of new railcars expected to come off the assembly line by the end of the decade. Should they expand the fleet or replace more of the aging trains? An answer to this question may be found in Metro's ridership forecasts — based on major growth around its stations in D.C., Maryland, and Virginia.

Although rail ridership has declined about 10 percent over the past five years, it still reaches 730,000 trips on the typical weekday. Metro estimates those trips are generated by 400,000 unique customers.

On its planning blog, Metro has described a model it created to measure the effect of land use on future ridership, determining 84,000 additional daily trips will be produced by the more than 100 million square feet of development either under construction now or planned for completion by 2020 within a half-mile of its rail stations.

The list of real estate projects is being compiled for Metro's planning office by the consulting firm Jones Lang LaSalle. The shift toward transit-oriented development (dense, mixed-use real estate built in close proximity to transit stations) is being driven by several factors, according to Metro planners, including the influx of urban dwellers who do not own cars and the desires of large employers, like Marriott, seeking to relocate near rail transit.

One nationally regarded real estate expert says this trend definitely will increase demand on Metro's already strained rail capacity.

"It's crucial to understand that with our economy, that with any economy for the 6,000 years we've been building cities, transportation drives development. It is the most important infrastructure category. Today the number one transportation category, particularly in metro Washington, is rail transit," said Chris Leinberger, a metropolitan land use specialist at The George Washington University and president of LOCUS, a research group affiliated with the D.C.-based advocacy organization Smart Growth America.

“That 100 million square feet is not net growth. It is not just dealing with increased population and jobs we expect; it is also replacing obsolete office space. About 40 percent of our office space is approaching obsolescence because they are business parks,” Leinberger said.

“The most telling story is Marriott. They’ve said they’ll stay in the metropolitan region — they’re not saying where — but it must be at a Metro station. Marriott is leaving a drivable-only business park to move to a walkable urban place,” he added.

Metro eventually could need additional tunnels and stations, but in the short-term its goal should be more efficient use of the existing system, he said.

“Absolutely we have to add capacity. We have to first add capacity through efficiency. That means the automation of the trains and increasing the length of the trains. We need to get more out of the system,” Leinberger said.

Recent research indicates reasonable walking distance in the real estate market is a half-mile, Leinberger said. This development could quadruple the amount of land affected by a rail station.

“Within that half-mile we need rail stations to be high-density, mixed use. Outside that half-mile, it goes back to single-family homes.”

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